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ABSTRACT

The National Education Association (NEA) offers its vision of schools in the 21st century, describes today's schools, and identifies practical solutions for improvement. Nine overarching principles incorporate the recommendations made. These nine principles are the basis for the NEA's Action Plan for Educational Excellence: (1) students must master what is taught; (2) students must be active participants in learning; (3) full learning opportunity must be available for all students; (4) learning should occur throughout life; (5) authority must be vested in the local school faculty; (6) school staff must be professionally compensated; (7) there must be high standards for teacher preparation and practice; (8) school/community resources must be coordinated to benefit students; and (9) adequate financial support for education is essential. (JD)

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AN OPEN LETTER TO AMERICA ON SCHOOLS STUDENTS AND TOMORROW

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National Education Association

An Open Letter to America on Schools, Students, and Tomorrow

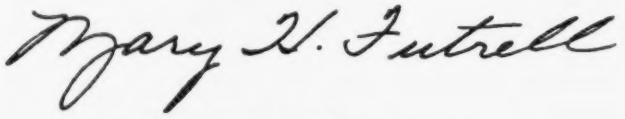
To the Citizens of America and the Parents of Our Students

Over the past 18 months, highly visible commissions, civic groups, and government agencies have all issued reports on the status of public education in our country today. Social scientists have quantified and analyzed, reporters have written article after article, and politicians have made headlines.

The National Education Association welcomes this long-overdue spotlight on the problems and the promise of our nation's public schools. But we also recognize that all the many national reports on education released so far have lacked one critically important element: the perspective of the men and women who teach and serve our nation's young people. A year ago, NEA's highest governing body, our Representative Assembly, established the Blue Ribbon Task Force on Educational Excellence to add this perspective to the increasingly lively national dialogue on our public schools.

As teachers and other school employees, we know what goes on inside America's classrooms. Over the past year, our Task Force has tapped this inside knowledge and consulted with a wide range of parents, students, and community leaders. The members of our Task Force have carefully studied the research and literature on educational reform. The final report, this open letter before you, addresses the wide disparity between what our schools are doing today and what they need to do tomorrow.

We have addressed this report to the American public and to the parents of our students because we need your help. Our schools face incredibly awesome responsibilities. We remain confident that teachers, parents, and other citizens working together can mobilize our nation to meet the educational challenge that confronts us all.



Mary Hatwood Futrell
President, National Education Association

Introduction

Education has furnished the thesis of the last chapter of every optmistic book on democracy written for 150 years.

—Walter Lippmann

America's experiment with democracy is deeply rooted in—indeed, dependent upon—a free system of public education of the highest quality. Our commitment to education for all has made us unique in the family of nations. This historic commitment has placed a heavy responsibility on our schools, and our schools have worked hard to meet this responsibility. Our schools have sought:

- to provide students with the basic knowledge and skills that every citizen needs.
- to inspire students to become active participants in the democratic life of our nation.
- to help students realize that learning never ends, that education is a life-long quest.

These goals will, and should, continue to guide our schools. In today's increasingly diverse and interdependent world, however, our schools must aim to do even more. As John Dewey proposed years ago in *Democracy and Education*, an important aim of education is to prepare students to understand their world and to participate actively and thoughtfully in changing it. Today's students will face an increasingly complex world. Our schools need to help them develop a heightened sense of responsible global citizenship.

The first-graders now in our public schools will be adults in the 21st century, and preparing them for the century ahead will demand a fresh and innovative approach to schooling. What should that approach be? How can we today move toward the schools our nation will need tomorrow? We believe *our nation's public schools must be totally restructured if they are to meet the needs of our students and our rapidly changing society.*

This restructuring for tomorrow must start today. *We challenge community and other educational leaders to join us in creating a specific action plan for restructuring the schools—a plan that will spell out how students should be taught, how technologies should be utilized, and how schools should be staffed.*

To initiate the process, we offer this report as a foundation for NEA participation. In the pages that follow, we present our vision of what our schools should be like in the 21st century. We then describe conditions in our schools today and identify practical solutions that can help build the opportunity for educational excellence all students deserve.

Education in the Year 2001

As every seasoned teacher is well aware, the students of 1984 are very different from the students of the '70s. The students now in our classrooms are more diverse, both linguistically and culturally, than they were only a decade ago. They are maturing earlier and earlier. Their attention spans are shorter, but they learn in many different ways.

The students of tomorrow—the students of the year 2001—will be even more diverse. The boundaries of what they may learn are not known and may not even exist.

In the year 2001, we believe that public education should—and will—address the needs of these young people and others with a variety of new relationships between school and student.

► Formal education will begin at an earlier age. The focus will be developmental. This formal early education will provide opportunities that foster intellectual, emotional, aesthetic, social, and physical growth. Early schooling will emphasize perceptual skills and psychomotor development and will carefully coordinate, with parent involvement, activities at home and school.

► The formal education that takes place inside public schools will be supplemented by numerous off-campus learning opportunities. New technologies will enhance informal learning in the home, in museums, at recreation centers, and in business workplaces.

► Books, discussions, laboratory experiments, tests, writing, films, and lectures will continue to be major learning vehicles. There will be ample time and space and opportunity for students to learn from one another, to meet with and learn from older people, to work with their hands and produce tangible articles, to create, to argue important ideas with adults and peers.

► Teachers will demand more of students and place more responsibilities on them.

► People will become students in the formal sense again and again during their adult lives. Since most adults in the 21st century will change careers several times, they will return to school to learn new work skills. They will also find myriad opportunities in schools to enrich their lives outside of their work.

In the year 2001, a more enlightened citizenry will comprehend and deal positively with complex problems and will demand new approaches to school curriculum.

The curriculum of the year 2001 will encompass many kinds of learning: knowledge about science, the humanities, mathematics, physical development, health, vocations, and the arts; the use of symbols, particularly language and numbers; and the realm of ideas and culture as expressed in music, literature, drama, and the visual arts.

Much more than skills in the ABCs will be expected from students. Mastery of the curriculum will become the standard. Schools will develop

methods and provide opportunities that enable all students to master instructional objectives and become active participants in the learning process.

Teachers will provide structure, support, and guidance to students in their academic pursuits. They will create and manage conditions that promote—even provoke—learning and plan programs based on individual student needs.

A school's faculty will be deployed in ways that permit individual students to receive the help they require in a timely fashion. The number of students assigned each teacher will be small enough to allow ample time to plan each student's program. Teachers will no longer be isolated from one another. They will regularly share knowledge and skills, both to help individual students and to improve their own professional competency.

Research and development will help teachers and parents better understand how to help students:

- learn to read.
- develop reading comprehension and build vocabulary.
- write and speak with clarity and logic.
- compute with accuracy.
- use technology to enhance learning.
- plan, organize, and solve problems.
- work more effectively in groups.
- help other students.

Teachers, parents, and students will hold school and community officials accountable for providing conditions for successful teaching and learning. The welfare of the student will be primary, and the organized teaching profession will set and enforce high standards of professional conduct for all its members.

Only the most talented will be granted the opportunity to become teachers. Teacher preparation programs will be rigorous, and prospective teachers will receive more practical experiences before entering the classroom. All newly hired teachers will be systematically assisted and supported at the individual school building level.

Teaching will be an attractive, life-long profession, and teachers will be professionally compensated. In addition to maintaining a direct teaching relationship with students, teachers will be encouraged to participate in the development of school program and policy. Teachers with particular interests in areas such as curriculum development, in-service training, or supporting newly inducted teachers will be provided with the opportunity for these and other tasks. There will be no hierarchical staffing systems within the teaching profession, only an exciting mix of equally important educational roles.

In the 21st century, schools will relate in new ways to the society that surrounds them. Decisions about instruction will be made at the school level and not by bureaucracies in school system central offices or state capitals.

Through collective bargaining, school staff and administrators will work together to create working conditions that support quality education. A national collective bargaining law supported by state legislation will ensure that all communities have access to this tested and effective process for resolving conflicts and planning for the future.

Funding for our schools will be sufficient to meet the goals of sound educational policy. All citizens, not just parents, will understand that spending money on educating children is an investment in the country's long-term future. Increased funding for education will actually produce lower government spending in other areas. As students become more effectively educated, fewer tax dollars will be needed for welfare and mental health care, for crime prevention, prisons, and jails.

Education will be a prime national concern, a matter of national security. The federal government will become a full partner with states and local communities and contribute its fair share to the funding of public education.

Moving Toward the Future

The year 2001 is less than a generation away. But we can build the future described above if American citizens begin working together today to design a specific and practical plan of action for excellence in education.

We look forward to working with all those who have a stake in the future of our schools: parents, researchers, school board members, legislators, governors, federal policymakers, business, industry, labor, and, of course, students.

We firmly believe that any plan for tomorrow's schools must be grounded in today's reality. The future will be shaped by steps that lead America's schools from where they are to where we wish them to be.

What should these steps be? We believe that 10 are critical. We must move immediately:

- to meet students' learning needs.
- to ensure each student's right to learn and to succeed.
- to provide students of all ages with equal access to school.
- to improve teaching and working conditions in the schools.
- to improve the training of new teachers.
- to evaluate professional skills.
- to strengthen school management.
- to coordinate school and community services.
- to base teachers' salaries on those of comparable professions.
- to finance our schools adequately.

Each of these steps is discussed in more detail below. We begin each discussion with a list of basic concerns common to teachers* and parents alike. We have italicized our specific recommendations for action.

Meeting Students' Learning Needs

To help schools better meet students' learning needs, we believe the following concerns must be addressed:

► Curricula that emphasize the regurgitation of facts instead of thinking and problem-solving.

► Rigid graduation requirements that discourage students from exploring potential interests in fields such as journalism, drama, art, or music.

► Schools that require all students to learn in the same way, at the same time, and at the same pace.

► Tests that determine what students will learn instead of what they need to learn.

As we move toward a system of schooling for the 21st century, it is time to broaden traditional ideas about what is taught, how it is taught, and how to measure student learning.

Basic skills have been and will certainly continue to be critical to continued student growth. Schools must strengthen their ability to make students literate in communications and computation. Schools must also expand the definition of what is basic to a quality education. We believe that definition should include the ability to think critically, to analyze issues, to formulate solutions to problems, and to ask and seek answers to questions.

Schooling must provide all students with the opportunity to develop intellectually, socially, emotionally, aesthetically, and physically throughout their lifetimes. Opportunities for continuous learning will be vital to an educated citizenry in the 21st century.

As teachers, we know that students are served poorly by mass education systems that are unresponsive to how individual students learn. All too often, students develop a negative feeling about learning because the system has, in effect, told them they cannot learn. We believe *it is critical to revamp educational systems to raise expectations for all students and to provide the resources to meet these expectations.*

To accomplish this goal, every school should establish clear, significant, appropriate, and achievable expectations for students. Schools must provide the resources that will enable students to know their subjects.

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*"Teachers" as used in this document means all nonadministrative certificated personnel.

Mastery—not a mere "passing grade"— can be a realistic goal if students are given the time and a learning environment that is free of the restrictions and failures of age-level groupings.

We also believe parents have the right to hold schools accountable, the right to expect schools to provide alternatives for students who do not master what is taught. Teachers must have the opportunity to use their professional know-how to provide students with these alternatives. Students afforded such tailored learning opportunities will master what is taught. If schools seriously begin to address students' needs for additional or different learning experiences, then remedial education as we know it will become a thing of the past.

We cannot, of course, effectively expand what is basic to a quality education for all students without at the same time expanding our ability to measure learning. *Student learning must be assessed with measures that are directly linked to the lessons teachers teach and the materials teachers use.* Teacher-developed tests, formal and informal observations, and student projects are all effective measures. Standardized tests can usefully supplement these measures, providing information that enables teachers to compare student performance with national norms. All tests should be primarily diagnostic in nature and used in the development of instructional programs. Tests should be devoid of racial, cultural, and gender biases.

Schools need to be more flexible. Rigid schedules and grouping patterns only hamper learning. *Teachers need the freedom and flexibility to schedule time and design programs that meet the needs of students. They need freedom from interruptions so that students can learn and teachers can teach.*

Ensuring Each Student's Right To Learn and To Succeed

To ensure each student's right to learn and to succeed, we believe the following concerns must be addressed:

- ► Pressures causing students to drop out or to be pushed out.
- ► Situations fostering truancy.
- ► Interruptions by disruptive students, and the factors that make students disruptive.
- ► Shortages of learning materials for students with special needs.
- ► Communication problems for students who cannot speak English.
- ► Problems for students who lack adequate health care.

We cannot state our position too strongly: Achieving equality of educational opportunity must remain an American priority. Equity must be-

come a cornerstone of tomorrow's system of schooling. Through a commitment to equal opportunity, we enhance the schools' capacity to educate all students, and we increase public education's ability to meet the needs of our communities and our nation.

The NEA will continue to work for schools that give all students equal access to the best available and most advanced learning resources, regardless of their gender, age, race, national origin, religion, income, or place of residence.

We remain committed to providing additional assistance to students with special needs, particularly the disadvantaged, the limited-English-speaking, and the handicapped. These learners need more than equal access to the same learning opportunities afforded more advantaged students. Similarly, we remain committed to providing learning opportunities for gifted and talented students which allow them to realize their full potential as well.

In keeping with our concerns about access, equity, and excellence, we urge *the federal government to strengthen its commitment to programs enacted to enhance educational opportunities for women and girls, the handicapped, and the disadvantaged.* In addition, *this country must complete the job of integrating our schools by building upon successful desegregation efforts and by ensuring all students equal access to the technological knowledge that will become more and more a part of American life.*

Steps also must be taken at the school building level to protect each student's right to learn. *Every school district should develop agreed-upon standards of discipline for implementation at the building level that will govern the actions of all who are involved in schooling, standards that make it clear the school is, first and foremost, a place for learning.* Students, parents, faculty, and other school staff should develop procedures for enforcing these standards.

We urge *schools to back up their student behavior codes with comprehensive programs to help problem students become academically productive.* In some cases, this may require the placement of particularly disruptive students in short-term alternative settings designed to move them back into mainstream classrooms.

We also believe *school districts should provide programs for the early detection of student problems.* Information about these problems should be shared with teachers, who will use it to plan appropriate instruction. As teachers, we have learned that students who misbehave often see themselves as academic failures. Individualized programs, remedial education, health services or counseling, as well as disciplinary action, may all be appropriate means to help these students.

Providing Students of All Ages With Equal Access to School

To provide students of all ages with equal access to school, we believe the following concerns must be addressed:

► The absence of structured developmental activities for many preschool children.
► The inadequacies of understaffed and underequipped day care facilities.
► The shortage of enriching learning opportunities available to adults who have completed their formal school careers.

We believe our educational system must expand the traditional definitions of "student" and "learning." It is no longer appropriate to restrict our view of students to kindergarten through college-age learners. It is no longer appropriate to view learning as an activity that takes place for only a limited number of years. Educational opportunities must span age groups, and learning must be continuous if we are to prepare Americans for the technological and social changes of today and tomorrow.

The working parents of today's students need child care services. Our schools are not and should not be baby-sitting centers, but they can offer early childhood instructional activities that can provide the foundation for successful academic careers.

Schools are places where learners can go to access information, test ideas, and develop skills to help them with career choices. These are the resources schools must provide to meet the needs of citizens in an information-based economy.

Learners of all ages must have access to schools. The NEA recommends that *schools begin the developmental education of students at age four. Opportunities for schooling should extend into adult life.*

Improving Teaching and Working Conditions in the Schools

To improve teaching and working conditions in the schools, we believe the following concerns must be addressed:

► The lack of time teachers have to work with individual students.
► The rising number of classrooms that are overflowing with students.

► The constant shortages of textbooks that make it impossible for students to take their books home and study.

► The inadequate amount of time teachers have available to critique student writing assignments.

► The frustration of work schedules so tight that teachers have no time to observe other classes and learn from other teachers.

► The lack of opportunity teachers have to consult with other teachers and school personnel.

► The precious few moments made available for meaningful parent-teacher conferences.

► The illogic of having decisions imposed upon teachers by people who haven't set foot in a classroom since blackboards turned green.

The job of teaching must be made manageable. We believe this requires, at the least, that:

- *large group instruction give way to an emphasis on small classes.*
- *intrusions on teaching time be eliminated.*
- *teachers be provided time to plan during the school day.*
- *teachers also be guaranteed time to critique student assignments and work with individual students.*
- *teachers be ensured the professional authority and the academic freedom to make decisions about what to teach, how to teach, and how to evaluate their students.*

Teachers need modern teaching materials, laboratories, science equipment, libraries, and books that are current and relevant to today's world. Few things demoralize teachers and students faster than dog-eared, outdated textbooks.

Teachers also need new technology. Computers, video equipment, and other high-tech devices are valuable learning tools. This technology can help us better diagnose students' individual learning needs and prescribe appropriate learning opportunities.

Technology also promises to open a world of new information and new skills for students. The personal computer is revolutionizing the school library and the teaching of research skills. *Schools and their faculties must be afforded the opportunity to explore the potential of emerging technology to manage and advance instruction. Teachers must be provided with proper training about the educational applications of high-tech devices and must be allowed to make decisions about their use in the schools. Teachers and students must be provided with the opportunity to develop an understanding of the social and economic impact of technology on the world in which they will live.*

Improving the Training Of New Teachers

To improve the training of new teachers, we believe the following concerns must be addressed:

- ► The state of our nation's teacher education programs.
- ► The shrinking number of college students who plan to be teachers.
- ► The quality of the preparation new teachers receive before they enter the classroom.

As practicing teachers, we want every new teacher who joins our ranks to be a first-rate professional with the capacity and skills necessary to participate fully in and meet the demands of a changing school and society.

The profession insists that colleges establish rigorous requirements for entry into teacher education programs. Colleges should accept only those men and women who can provide evidence of academic ability and who can demonstrate through interviews and recommendations a commitment to teaching.

We believe every teacher must have a strong background in the liberal arts and a teaching specialty. Teachers also need a solid understanding of effective teaching strategies and learning theory. This means simply that teachers need to understand how children grow, develop, and learn.

To graduate, teacher education students must be able to demonstrate that they can apply their knowledge and skills in a variety of settings. We believe strongly that colleges of education must have sufficient resources to provide their students with opportunities to apply what they have learned in their courses to actual classroom situations under the supervision of practicing teachers.

College of education students must also be continually evaluated through a variety of assessment techniques such as paper-and-pencil tests, videotapes, student theses, and direct observation. We insist that only those students who have successfully completed such rigorous training be issued certificates and be given the right to teach.

We believe *educators can ensure the quality of teacher education programs if these programs are subject to carefully designed, rigorous standards imposed by an independent state agency controlled by the profession.* The NEA has proposed such standards in *Excellence in Our Schools, Teacher Education: An Action Plan*, adopted by the Association in 1982.

Evaluating Professional Skills

To better evaluate the professional skills of educators, we believe the following concerns must be addressed:

► The negligence of school districts that never evaluate their teachers and administrators.
► The poor quality of professional development opportunities offered practicing teachers and administrators.
► The problems of those few teachers and administrators who do not have sufficient skills to meet the demands of the profession.

We insist that there be a competent teacher in every classroom and a competent administrator in every school. There is only one way to achieve this goal: Every school district must establish a comprehensive system of personnel evaluation.

We are tired of excuses from school officials. They must start implementing meaningful evaluation programs. No tenure law prevents a school district from evaluating teachers and administrators. No education association can force—or wants to force—a school district to retain an incompetent educator. What teachers want is fair, competent, and regular evaluation of the jobs they do. For such an evaluation system to be effective, teachers also want procedural guarantees and due process.

There must be a comprehensive personnel evaluation system in every school district, a system that is mutually designed and agreed upon through collective bargaining between teachers and school officials. But no evaluation system can succeed without trained evaluators. *School districts must carefully train all administrators in the evaluation system that has been designed for their school staff.*

What is the best method to evaluate teachers? There is, unfortunately, not enough reliable research that addresses this question. To support the development of better evaluation techniques, *the NEA will conduct a comprehensive study of the systems currently used to evaluate teachers. Some of these systems (such as peer review, videotaped observations, and observation by administrators) have raised many questions within the education community. The NEA study will focus on the impact of those evaluation systems on educational improvement, collegiality, collective bargaining, morale, and the retention of teachers.*

We seek evaluation and staff development systems that help teachers improve their skills. Telling a teacher that he or she is "weak" is not enough. School systems must provide the courses, workshops, and individualized attention teachers need. Evaluation systems that do not result in opportunities for continuing education are professionally and intellectually meaningless. A few days of "in-service" are no substitute for sound professional development programs.

We also seek programs that enable teachers to determine their own professional needs and stay current in their subject specialty. *Every school should be a "teacher center" that provides ongoing teacher-designed professional development activities. Every school should establish conditions that cause teachers to be inquirers into their own practice and their students' learning.* In addition to familiar programs such as sabbaticals, *school districts should provide opportunities for teamwork among teachers by offering minigrants for educational excellence projects designed and developed by teachers.*

Strengthening School Management

To strengthen school management, we believe the following concerns must be addressed:

- ► The growth of education bureaucracies centralized in school district headquarters.
- ► The poor quality of management training offered school officials.
- ► The disinterest of school decision makers in the opinions of teachers.

Both common sense and research tell us that professional school management can help teachers do their jobs better. Many of today's schools, however, resemble large, complex businesses. They are difficult to manage.

Unfortunately, today's typical school management systems only compound this difficulty. Top school managers have become isolated from the teachers who really know what's happening in the schools. More and more decisions that affect classrooms are made farther and farther from the classroom door.

It is time to return authority to school building staff, to strengthen the ability of the school staff to manage schools. Teachers do not want to "take over" the management of schools. We do want the ability to impact the decisions that affect our students. Teachers must be involved in all decisions that affect instruction: scheduling students, how best to use limited time for instruction, selecting the textbooks, workbooks, or computer programs our students will use.

Teachers want to work with administrators to bring our mutual expertise to bear on these decisions. We realize it will take more than occasional staff meetings to make this collaboration work effectively. School administrators must provide the necessary leadership.

We believe that administrators need to bring certain key skills to this management partnership. *Administrators need to be trained in participatory decision making as well as in personnel selection and staff evaluation. Such skills will help to ensure that the best teachers enter and remain in the classroom.*

Teachers see administrators as allies in the effort to deliver quality instructional programs. A well-designed teacher-administrator partnership can ensure us the working conditions that will allow us to practice our craft.

Coordinating School and Community Services

To better coordinate school and community services, we believe the following concerns must be addressed:

- Abused children.
- Hungry children.
- Latch-key children.
- Alcohol-affected and drug-affected children.

As teachers, we know that abused children have difficulty learning. Hungry children cannot concentrate on their lessons. Children whose families are going through crisis cannot devote their full attention to instruction. Consequently, over the years schools have accepted increasing responsibilities for the health and welfare of children.

The rationale behind this increased responsibility was simple: If the schools didn't help, who would?

Schools will continue to have noninstructional responsibilities for the health and welfare of their students. But the problems students bring to their classes are becoming more diverse and complex each day. Their solution demands the experience, training, resources, and time that school staff members simply do not have.

These problems cannot be addressed without the active help of appropriate service agencies. What schools can do is help coordinate the services these agencies offer. Schools, after all, are the natural focal point for reaching children and young adults. We recommend that *local governments coordinate badly needed health and welfare services for our students through the school. This coordination should be carefully planned to make sure no instructional time is lost.*

Basing Teachers' Salaries on Those of Comparable Professions

To recruit and retain quality teachers, we believe the following concerns must be addressed:

- ► Talented people who choose not to enter teaching because teacher pay is so miserably low.
- ► Teachers who have to moonlight to make ends meet.
- ► Good teachers who leave the classroom for higher-paying jobs.

Teachers, like everyone else, are concerned about salaries and opportunities for advancement.

Historically, teachers have never been highly paid. In the past, society never had to worry seriously about low teacher salaries. No matter how poorly teachers were paid, there were almost always enough teachers; many competing and higher-paying professions were traditionally off-limits to women and minorities.

Today, of course, these barriers to opportunity are at long last falling. Teaching must now compete with other professions for its share of the nation's talented young people. Yet the salaries currently paid practicing teachers are so low that the number of college students choosing a teaching career has fallen drastically. Many talented teachers now in the classroom are leaving teaching to take jobs in other fields with greater pay and better working conditions. They simply cannot afford to continue teaching and maintain a decent standard of living for their families.

We feel it is time to pay teachers professionally. As a first step, we recommend starting teachers at a salary level that matches the starting salary of professions that require similar skills and training. *The starting teacher salary in the United States should be not less than $24,000, with raises equivalent to those in comparable professions.*

During the past year, many reports and newspaper editorials have stressed the need to increase teachers' pay. But some politicians have suggested merit pay as an alternative to higher teacher salary schedules.

Merit pay will not bring teachers' salaries in line with other professions. Merit pay will not attract talented people into the teaching profession or help students learn. In fact, many researchers conclude that merit-pay type plans actually erode the cooperation between teachers that makes for quality education. For these reasons, the NEA is unalterably opposed to so-called merit pay plans.

Additionally, the NEA is opposed to any alternative compensation plans that act as a substitute for the proportionate across-the-board salary increases all teachers need and deserve.

Financing Our Schools Adequately

To finance our schools adequately, we believe the following concerns must be addressed:

► Austerity budgets that deny students textbooks.
► Budget shortfalls that cost our colleagues their jobs and deny students an opportunity to learn.
► Tax bases too low for school districts to afford to hire an arts teacher, stock a library, or equip a chemistry lab.

Our schools need more money. If our local, state, and national governments would work together, that money would be available.

Much of the financial support for schools will continue to come from local property taxes. We believe that more communities would support adequate property tax revenue for better schools if residential, business, and commercial property taxes were equitable. We believe *state governments should institute reforms that would more equitably distribute the property tax burden among low-, middle-, and upper-income taxpayers.*

Reforming local property taxes is a first step toward adequate financial support for our schools. Reforming state tax systems is the next key step. We suggest that each state develop a taxation system that:

- produces revenues commensurate with school needs.
- distributes the tax burden equitably between and among citizens and businesses.
- ensures that all taxpayers pay their fair share.
- raises revenue efficiently, at the lowest possible cost.

The NEA will support efforts by teachers and parents to convene forums and conferences that will plan and propose reforms in local taxation systems and state aid formulas.

The challenge of funding our schools adequately cannot be met at just the local and state levels. *The federal government must do its part to support our public schools.*

Federal funds currently make up only 6 percent of the funds that support elementary and secondary education. We believe that this meager percentage amounts to a shameful abandonment of the federal government's responsibility to our nation's future.

Local school districts cannot be expected to bear the above-average cost of educating special pupil populations—the disadvantaged, the disabled, the non-English-speaking. *Ensuring the full funding of costs that exceed the average per-pupil expenditure is a federal responsibility.*

Sound decision making at the local school district level requires basic data about population, economic, and social trends. *Efficiency demands that the federal government finance the collection of this basic data.* Local schools also need the perspective that educational research and development can provide. *This research can be efficiently funded only at the federal level.*

Schools directly affected by federal policy—schools, for instance, near military bases, on Indian reservations, or with heavy immigrant populations—must have federal support at least to the degree that their local revenues are impaired or their costs increased.

Finally, *the federal government should grant supplemental aid to those states that, in spite of strenuous efforts, are not raising sufficient funds to provide all students with a quality education.*

Working Together

In the preceding pages we have sketched our vision for the future. We have also outlined the concrete steps that citizens, parents, teachers, and other school employees can take here and now to make that future possible.

There is only so much that a national organization such as NEA can do or should do. We can do research. We can bring people together. We can promote the constructive dialogue that makes progress possible. We can make politicians listen—and sometimes even act.

Many of the state and local affiliates that make up the NEA have already begun working with parents to renew our public schools. We hope that this open letter will strengthen that effort.

There is much work to be done. All of us, working together, can make the difference. We have the talent; we have the vision; we must strengthen our will.

The conflict over public education is a debate over the values and goals which should shape our society. It is a debate over the expectations we should have for ourselves and our children, for our future, and for our society. The dream of what America can be, the high goals her people share, and the great strengths her people possess have always been closely interwoven with our system of public education. The National Education Association refuses to accept the destruction of that dream or a lowering of our expectations—for ourselves, for our students, or for American society. In this period when the American dream is being tried and tested as never before, we redouble our commitment to education as the foundation of democracy.

Agenda for Excellence

Nine overarching principles incorporate the recommendations in *An Open Letter to America on Schools, Students, and Tomorrow.* These nine principles are the basis for NEA's Action Plan for Educational Excellence.

Principle One: *Students must master what is taught.* The objective of education should not be mere passing grades but a demonstrated grasp of the fundamentals, the competent use of skills, and command of subjects. Mastery of what is taught is the standard of excellence, with schools offering a comprehensive curriculum, organizing time, and providing resources for this purpose.

Principle Two: *Students must be active participants in learning.* There must be high expectations for student performance, learning environments free from disruptive behavior, and learning activities designed to improve student initiative. Students must be involved in questioning and exploration rather than be passive recipients of information.

Principle Three: *Full learning opportunity must be available for all students.* All students must be provided varied and appropriate learning opportunities that will enable them to realize their individual potential, irrespective of economic, social, physical, or psychological condition.

Principle Four: *Learning should occur throughout life.* Appropriate opportunities for learning must be available in all school districts for all age groups.

Principle Five: *Authority must be vested in the local school faculty.* More appropriate decisions about teaching and learning are made by those closest to students and the community.

Principle Six: *School staff must be professionally compensated.* Teacher salaries must be commensurate with those in comparable professions in order to attract and retain the best teachers.

Principle Seven: *There must be high standards for teacher preparation and practice.* Professional competence must be rooted in intellectually stimulating and demanding teacher preparation programs, rigorous personnel evaluation procedures, and meaningful professional and staff development programs.

Principle Eight: *School/community resources must be coordinated to benefit students.* Problems not directly related to learning but affecting students' ability to learn must be resolved by school/community collaboration and coordination.

Principle Nine: *Adequate financial support for education is essential.* Excellence in education depends on the combined resources of federal, state, and local governments.